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GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY

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Docket # 99-4

STATEMENT OF GOVERNOR MARY THOMAS

FCC HEARING: TELECOMMUNICATION ISSUES IN INDIAN

COUNTRY

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

Good Morning, on behalf of the Gila River Indian Community and the Gila River Telecommunications Company (GRTI), a tribally owned telecommunications company, I want to welcome you to the Community and thank you for the opportunity to provide our perspective on telecommunication issues on Indian lands.

I first want to thank you for your visit yesterday to our community to see first hand the very real circumstances that exist with many of our residents and their lack of access to basic phone service. While no FCC panel has ever visited Indian country, I am encouraged by your commitment to understand and take action on several issues that will be raised this morning. We are glad that you have recognized some of the issues of providing basic telephone services on the reservation. As you will come to find out there are also unique needs that exist in each Indian reservation community.

To put this in greater perspective, the reservation of the Gila River Indian Community is approximately 581 square miles. The boundaries extend as far north as west Phoenix to Casa Grande and Coolidge to our south. Although we are located in close proximity to the Phoenix metropolitan area, our community is generally a rural area where there are approximately less than five customers per square mile. In 1987, prior to the establishment of GRTI only 18% (600) of residential homes, had telephone service.

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Today, through the diligent work of GRTI approximately 34%, or 1,300, of our residential homes have phone service. Notably, this statistic does not include nearly 1,400 business phone lines dedicated to governmental use, current businesses located on the reservation, and other entities. While these numbers represent an overall increase of 88% in residential phone service over the past decade, the community still remains far behind the national statistics. There are several factors that I will allude to in a minute.

There is one clear illustration why our community established its own telecommunications company. In 1984, former Governor Thomas White inquired with U.S. West to have a phone installed in his house. He lived about a half of a mile from the US West cable and they quoted him \$7,000 to install a phone line to his home. He couldn't afford this enormous price and therefore went without a phone, as many community members did because of the high costs. The goal and mission of GRTI is to serve our community and to provide affordable and quality phone service.

In this regard, there are several issues that are of significant concern to the Gila River Indian Community.

1. **Universal Service Funding** - Gila River Telecommunications currently receives 100% of potential USF funding. There have been discussions within the FCC to decrease the federal funding share of distribution from 100% to 25% and assign the remaining share of 75% to state funding. If this proposal were to be implemented, funding now going to GRTI could be dramatically reduced. As a sovereign entity and one not regulated by the state in these matters the GRIC is concerned with any reallocation proposal considered by the FCC. We would hope the FCC would give full consideration of any proposal that may adversely impact the current funding mechanism.
2. Greater access to "Public Safety" Frequencies as utilized by law enforcement, fire and other emergency operations. This is a critical issue to our community as tremendous growth in our Law Enforcement and Fire departments has resulted in a

necessity for more Public Safety frequencies. For example, when the FCC established the Public Safety Plan in 1987 that designated Arizona as one of 55 regions, only **TWO** Native American community representatives were involved in the regional plan submitted to the FCC. Today, the community has license to just **TWO** frequencies that are being reused by other Indian communities. It is projected, Mr. Chairman, that in the next few years our community will have nearly 1,700 subscriber units (handheld mobile and portable radios) for public safety use. As we look at this growth it will be imperative to adequate dedicated frequencies available. As a result of the lack of adequate frequencies, there have been several instances that have proven the lack of ability for emergency service responders to reliably communicate with Emergency Operations Centers, evacuation shelters, evacuation resources and other responding jurisdictions. We would ask you to strongly consider allocating frequencies directly to Indian communities.

3. **Basic services, Advanced services, New technologies.** The main goal of GRTI is to provide community members with basic telephone service. We also have goals to broaden our services, including expanded wireless service. The digital microwave broadcast solution can offer multi-line or high-speed data service, but is only offered on an experimental basis. Since this solution is wireless, no cabling is required as with landline services. Increased wireless services would be less expensive and increase GRTI's ability to offer a greater range of services to more customers. We ask that the digital microwave broadcast solution be approved for use as soon as possible.
4. **Avenues for progress.** It is the goal of GRTI to provide the best high-quality telephone service to community members. This goal can be reached if the FCC adopted a policy statement recognizing the sovereign status of federally recognized Indian tribes. This policy would assure us, as Indian Nations, that the FCC would consider the impact that all rules and regulations will have on Indian tribes, prior to the enactment of such rules and regulations. Additionally, better relationships between Indian Tribes and the FCC would flourish if the FCC included in that policy

statement recognition of its government-to-government relationship with Indian tribes. This approach would be consistent with President Clinton's May 14, 1998 and May 4, 1994 Executive Orders. Such action would assure Indian tribes that the FCC would recognize and respect the sovereign status, and conduct any necessary discussions and negotiations with tribes on that basis.

Mr. Chairman and Commissioners, as our community continues to experience rapid growth, much like that of the rest of the Phoenix metropolitan area, so to does our need for adequate communications systems. For residential service it is our hope to continue to develop the infrastructure needed to reach a great many more homes. For public safety, it is already evident that not having dedicated frequencies for our use will only further threaten quick communication between our various public safety operations. This not only impacts our community members, and public safety personnel, but also those many non-Individuals who travel through our borders along I-10, each and every day. Finally, in terms of education and library services we are hopeful to utilize existing FCC resources to further develop our communication services via the Internet and other applications.

In closing, not long ago, community members lined up at the St. Peters Mission to use the telephone there to call family members because they could not afford to have phones in their homes. Because community members did not have access to phones to call for emergency services, families lost loved ones due to lack of immediate medical care and fires were a certain devastation.

We have come a long way, but there is still so much work to do. We commend the efforts of the FCC in addressing the telecom concerns of Gila River Indian Community and other Indian Nations. We hope these efforts will continue to make further improvements and together, we can find solutions to improve the telecom services on Indian land. Thank you.